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Phishers dial in to VOIP

Users are told to verify account information on a phony customer support number that sounds identical to the bank's

By Robert McMillan, IDG News Service

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Taking advantage of the low cost of VOIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technology, thieves have now begun luring victims to automated call centers via a new kind of phishing attack.

Typically phishers e-mail their victims, trying to lure them into revealing sensitive information on bogus Web sites. But instead victims to click on a Web link, this attack asks users to verify account information on a phony customer support number.

"Part of the danger here is just the fact that it is novel," said Adam O'Donnell, senior research scientist with Cloudmark, an e-company in San Francisco. "Most people are pretty comfortable calling to a phone number that they think is their bank's."

To date the phone phishing attacks have not been widespread. Cloudmark first started seeing these attacks in mid-April and stopped after continuing on a very limited scale for about three days. "It looks like a single scammer doing a proof of concept said.

In total, Cloudmark intercepted about 1,000 of these phishing messages, a small number considering that Cloudmark's e-mail service is used to filter mail for about 100 million mailboxes. O'Donnell said.

However, the attacks caught Cloudmark's attention because of its use of a telephone number, which was served by a small VOIP carrier. This made them some of the first to leverage the cost savings of VOIP. O'Donnell said.

VOIP services are appealing because they allow customers to set up numbers anywhere in the globe. And because they can be combined with telephone software like the open-source Asterisk PBX (Private Branch Exchange) product, it can be inexpensive for thieves to set up a professional-sounding line.

"Getting a traditional phone number is high-cost," O'Donnell said. "With VOIP, the barrier to entry is significantly lowered."

Spammers have already been taking advantage of these low costs, using phone numbers instead of Web sites in their e-mail solicitations, but this was the first time Cloudmark had seen the approach used by phishers, he said.

O'Donnell declined to name the regional East Coast financial institution that was targeted in this attack.